An Empirical Study of License Violations in Open Source Projects

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Question

Source A: GPL v2 only

Source B: GPL v3

Program C

Source: http://www.groklaw.net/article.php?story=20100803132055210
Question

Source A: GPL v2 only

Source B: GPL v3

Program C

Is this valid?
The BusyBox GPL violation (1/2)

- **GPL v2** licensed minimal Unix-like shell utilities optimized for use in embedded devices
- Have filed multiple cases of unlawful use; most recently against the likes of:
  - Best Buy, Samsung, Westinghouse
  - JVC, Western Digital, Robert Bosch
  - Phoebe Micro, Humax USA
  - Comtrend, Dobbs-Stanford
  - Versa Technology, Zyxel Communications
  - Astak, GCI Technologies

Source: http://www.groklaw.net/article.php?story=20100803132055210
The BusyBox GPL violation (2/2)

• What went wrong?
  – Violated the GPL v2 by distributing the BusyBox binary as part of their products without the source code

• Implications for one of the offenders:
  – Damages worth $90,000
  – Lawyers' costs and fees worth $47,865
  – Donate all their infringing products in possession to charity

Source: http://www.groklaw.net/article.php?story=201008031320555210
Hall of Shame!!

This page is no longer updated, these days we forward this sort of thing to the Software Freedom Law Center instead.

The following products and/or projects appear to use BusyBox, but do not appear to release source code as required by the BusyBox license. This is a violation of the law! The distributors of these products are invited to contact Erik Andersen if they have any confusion as to what is needed to bring their products into compliance, or if they have already brought their product into compliance and wish to be removed from the Hall of Shame.

Here are the details of exactly how to comply with the BusyBox license, so there should be no question as to exactly what is expected. Complying with the Busybox license is easy and completely free, so the companies listed below should be ashamed of themselves. Furthermore, each product listed here is subject to being legally ordered to cease and desist distribution for violation of copyright law, and the distributor of each product is subject to being sued for statutory copyright infringement damages of up to $150,000 per work plus legal fees. Nobody wants to be sued, and Erik certainly would prefer to spend his time doing better things than sue people. But he will sue if forced to do so to maintain compliance.

Do everyone a favor and don't break the law -- if you use busybox, comply with the busybox license by releasing the source code with your product.
Software Licenses

• **Purpose:**
  – Means of using/distributing/modifying software without violating copyright laws
  – Protect the original author’s rights
  – Have an effect on the end user’s rights

• **Two types:**
  – Proprietary licenses
  – Free and Open Source (FOSS) licenses
Open Source Software (OSS) Licensing

• Total of 69 Open Source Initiative (OSI) approved licenses (as of September 2012)
  – Every open source license must follow the requirements listed in the Open Source Definition (OSD)

• Varying flexibility of each license
  – Has an impact on the degree of code reuse
  – Problems arise when merging components with incompatible licenses
Copyright is the law by which an individual posses all rights to modify, distribute or copy his/her work

Copyleft is the transfer of Copyright under the condition that the same rights are preserved in all future distributions/modifications (share-alike)
OSS License types

• Three types:
  – Strong Copyleft licenses
  – Weak Copyleft licenses
  – Permissive licenses

• Copyleft licenses are “viral” in nature
  – require the licensee to distribute the modified or derived work under the same license
  – Minimize the freedom to create software proprietary in nature
**Open Source Software (OSS) Licensing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strong Copyleft</th>
<th>Weak Copyleft</th>
<th>Permissive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="GPL" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="LGPL" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Apache" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Mozilla Public License" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="BSD" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="MIT" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
- **Strong Copyleft** licenses like the GNU General Public License (GPL) enforce the sharing of source code when the software is redistributed.
- **Weak Copyleft** licenses like the Lesser General Public License (LGPL) are more lenient in terms of redistribution.
- **Permissive** licenses like the BSD and MIT licenses do not require the sharing of source code and are often used for projects that want to encourage commercial adoption.
Goal of this Study

Colloquial evidence suggest that open source developers have a hard time with licenses as well.

Aim to discover cases of violations in a large corpus of open source projects.
Sample Set Selection

• Retrieved a sample set of open source projects for examination
  – 1423 open source projects from Google Code project hosting (http://code.google.com/hosting)

• Random selection of sample space
  – To get a good mix of project types, selected projects based on tags such as – C, C++, Python, Java, Web, Flash, Embedded, Graphics, Android etc.
Sample Set License Types

GPL v3.0 and GPL v2.0 ~ 40%
Defining Violations

Program $P_1$
License $L_1$

Program $P_2$
License $L_2$

Project $P$
License $L_3$

$P_2$ includes $P_1$ and derived works, if any
Defining Violations

1. Check compatibility between \( L_1 \) and \( L_2 \)
2. Check compatibility between \( L_2 \) and \( L_3 \)
Defining Violations

Program $P_1$
GPL v2+

reused

Program $P_2$
MIT license

GPLv2+ requires all derived/modified work ($P_2$) to be released under the same license.
Defining Violations

Program P₁
MPL v1.1

reused

Program P₂
MPL v1.1

Project P
GPL v2+

GPLv2+ and the MPLv1.1 are incompatible
Detecting Code Reuse (1/3)

• To discover instances of code reuse, we use the ideas behind MOSS [Measure of Software Similarity], a plagiarism detection tool

• **Three step process:**
  – Preprocessing
  – Fingerprinting
  – Comparing
Detecting Code Reuse (2/3)

- **Preprocessing** phase removes unnecessary noise and unwanted characters in the source files.
- **Fingerprinting** phase generates hashes after diving the preprocessed files into k-grams (strings of size $k$)
  - Size of $k$ is programming language dependent
  - Hashing must minimize collisions
Detecting Code Reuse (3/3)

• **Comparison** phase groups files that have similar hashes together
  – #(hashes) for two files to be considered similar dependent on a threshold value
• To reduce false positives, we ignore hashes that correspond to license headers
• Pretty print files that are reported to be similar and manually examine them
Results (1/2)

• **Code Reuse:**
  – Discover a total of 103 cases of code reuse
  – Projects that have *High* activity are reused more than projects with *Medium* and *Low* activity

• **License Violations:**
  – 4 cases of license violations
  – GPL v2 being violated 3/4 times
## Results (2/2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Provider License</th>
<th>Acceptor</th>
<th>Acceptor License</th>
<th>Fix</th>
<th>Downloads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miranda</td>
<td>GPL v2+</td>
<td>TopToolBar</td>
<td>LGPL v3+</td>
<td>Convey under GPLv3+</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda</td>
<td>GPL v2+</td>
<td>Wi2Geoplugin</td>
<td>MIT</td>
<td>Convey under GPLv2+</td>
<td>91,146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLV Player</td>
<td>MPL v1.1</td>
<td>Khan Academy</td>
<td>Other Open Source</td>
<td>Choose compatible license</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arduino</td>
<td>GPL v2+</td>
<td>Micropendous</td>
<td>MIT</td>
<td>Keep parts under same license</td>
<td>1,238</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Impact

- Exchanged emails with the developers of the violating projects
- *Micropendous* has since then, changed its license to GPL v2+ & MIT
- Developers of *Khan Academy* have acknowledged the lack of a license on their GitHub account
- Awaiting response from the rest
Conclusions

• License compatibility turning into an intricate scenario
  – Legal implications may have far reaching consequences for both – OSS and proprietary software developers

• Multi-licensing
  – Release under multiple licenses, if possible, to offer a wider choice to end users

• Avoid forming new licenses to avoid dealing with existing ones upfront
Acknowledgements

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